

# FRINGE DWELLERS





# FRINGE DWELLERS

1959

29-31 1990 102187

*Prepared under the authority of the Minister for Territories, with the co-operation of the Ministers responsible for aboriginal welfare in the Australian states, for use by the Aborigines' Day Observance Committee and its Associates in connexion with the celebration of National Aborigines' Day in Australia, 10th July, 1959*

# Fringe Dwellers

---

THE BOOKLET "OUR ABORIGINES" (1957) AND THE PICTORIAL FOLDER "ASSIMILATION OF OUR ABORIGINES" (1958) SHOULD BE READ IN CONJUNCTION WITH THIS PUBLICATION

THERE are about 75,000 aborigines or people with a significant amount of aboriginal blood living in Australia. In addition, there are many, mostly in the eastern states, who are only partly aboriginal in ancestry. (For example, in Queensland there are about 10,000 full aborigines, but about 27,000 people with varying degrees of aboriginal blood.)

Comparatively few aborigines today live in a way that could be described as tribal. By far the greatest numbers of them are in touch with Europeans or are living in close association with Europeans. Most of the truly nomadic aborigines are in Western Australia where, of a total aboriginal population of nearly 22,000, some 6,000 are described as "nomad natives beyond confines of civilisation". In the Northern Territory there are probably about 500 (of a total aboriginal population of over 15,000) still living in a tribal state. In New South Wales and Victoria almost all of the people described as aborigines are people of mixed race and all of them are living in close touch with Europeans. In South Australia, of an "aboriginal" population of slightly more than 5,000, rather more than half are part-aboriginal.

The problem of aboriginal welfare today is therefore not primarily that of ministering to primitive, nomadic tribesmen living well away from the centres of civilisation. The major task—and, indeed, the more urgent, complex, and difficult task—is set by those native people who have already lost touch, or are losing touch, with their aboriginal





*Above—Tribal aborigines had a natural poise and dignity. Their material culture was very primitive but their social organisation was complex and their systems of ethics had many admirable features.*

*Right—Usually, in the first contact with the white community, aborigines acquire some clothing and begin to modify their primitive shelters by using pieces of bag, canvas, and tin.*

way of life and have not yet been fully received into the white Australian community. Many of these live on the outskirts of country centres in shanty towns, in settlements and missions close to towns, and in groups in depressed parts of urban areas. Some are still very greatly influenced by aboriginal ideas and standards; others have been long separated from this outlook and their way of life is similar in many respects to that of white Australians.









*The old . . . . .*

In varying degrees, therefore, most of these people are “fringe dwellers”—people living merely on the fringes of Australian towns, of the larger Australian society, of the Australian economy, only on the fringes of hope and often on the fringes of despair.

### **How did the problem arise ?**

THIS problem of the fringe dwellers can be understood only against the background of the history of the contact between Europeans and aborigines in this country.

There were never very many aborigines in Australia—probably no more than 300,000. Their origins are vague. Most authorities now agree, however, that they reached Australia in a series of migrations, from the islands to Australia's north, and were long isolated from the rest of mankind. Their original home may have been southern India. A slender brown-skinned people, different from the world's three main racial groups—Caucasoids, Negroids, and Mongoloids—they are classified by anthropologists as Australoids.

When the European settlement of Australia began in 1788, aborigines were scattered over the continent. Several hundred tribes, mostly speaking different languages, wandered on ritual “walkabouts”, and in search of food and water, within well-defined tribal areas. They built no permanent homes, living and sleeping in the open in some places and in others making only the most primitive shelters as a temporary protection from the elements. In some areas they used animal skins as cloaks but, in general, they wore no clothes. Apart from the dingo, which wandered half-wild around their camps and



accompanied them on hunting trips, they had no domestic animals. Although some of them harvested grass seeds to make a sort of flour, they did not plant or cultivate grain or vegetables. They dug their food from the soil with simple digging sticks; they hunted animals with boomerangs, or throwing sticks, and spears.

Although their material culture was most primitive, they developed intricate patterns of social behaviour based on complex magical and quasi-religious observances. Through a system of totems, initiated men were brought into close touch with a visible but nevertheless mystical world and an invisible world of equal if not greater importance. The old men of the tribe were the custodians of religious and magical secrets.

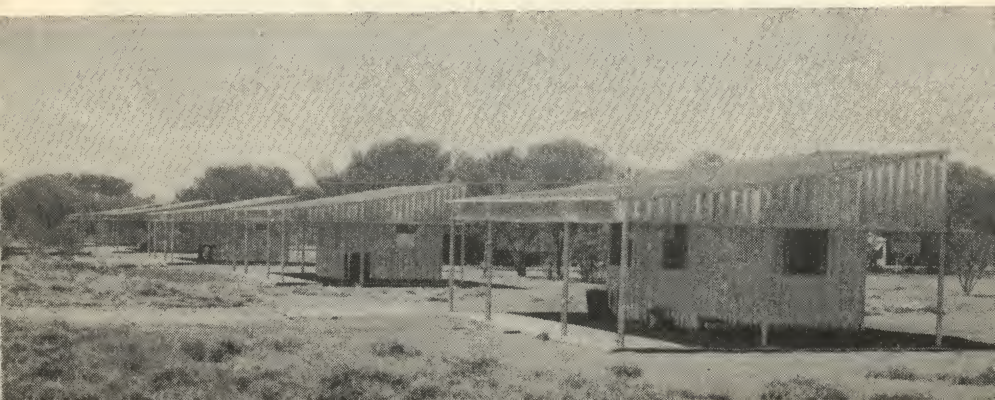
The aborigines were not oppressed with magic or superstition. Although sorcery existed among them, it was largely counter-balanced by white magic. They developed singing and dancing as social activities as well as art forms; in some places they practised rock and bark painting with much skill.

The aborigines led a communal life, unencumbered by personal possessions, with most of their time taken up in efforts to survive, in maintaining their mystical and magical relationship with the world about them, and in fulfilling the obligations of kinship.

The occupation of Australia by Europeans brought an almost immediate conflict in interests, although generally there was no fundamental ill-feeling between the settlers and the aborigines. The numbers of aborigines dwindled. Where they lived in contact with the Europeans (as the original fringe dwellers) their standards of living and health and morality rapidly declined.

Nevertheless ideas of "protection" persisted among many men of

.....and the new. Prefabricated aluminium dwellings—readily transported, easy for aborigines to erect under supervision, cool, durable, and easy to keep clean—are eminently suited to hot, remote areas where building materials are scarce.





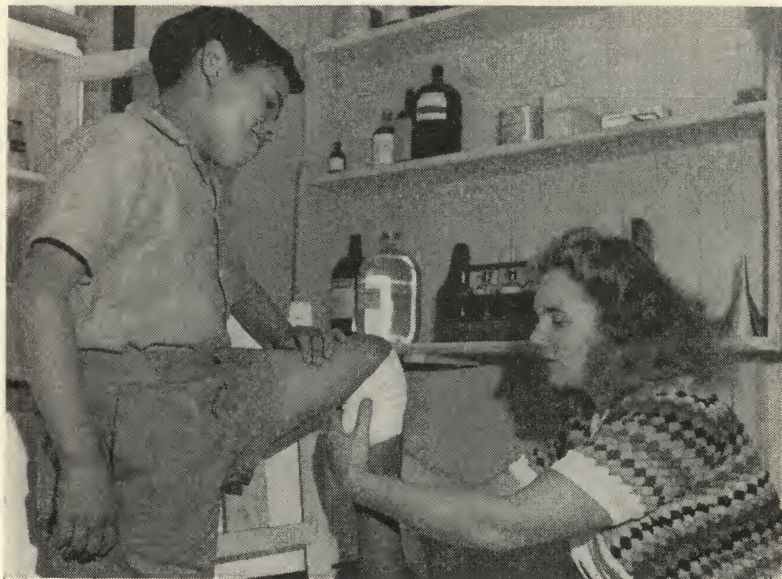
*In the past it has been customary for aborigines' first experience of permanent dwellings to be primitive, poorly-constructed, unhygienic, and depressing shacks. Now, however, it is common for aborigines making an early contact with the white culture to be accommodated in European-type houses on Government and Mission stations.*

good will and were given positive expression as the nineteenth century advanced—most positively perhaps through the constitution of “reserves”. But even the best informed and most benevolent among the white Australians felt that they could do little more than “smooth the dying pillow” of the aborigines.

Early in this century, the approach to the problem of the aborigines and part-aborigines became more enlightened and based on increasing knowledge, and it was accepted in Government and missionary circles that the aborigines need not die out, that they could be taught and encouraged to live as white people do. Though the outbreak of war in 1914 diverted vigour from this new approach its development accelerated in the 1920's and 1930's.

Though war once again slowed its expression, from 1945 the Commonwealth (directly responsible for aborigines in the Northern Territory only), the State Governments (each directly responsible for





*At all Government and Mission establishments for aborigines and part-aborigines, first aid facilities and skilled nursing are available.*

the aborigines within its own borders), and the various Christian Missions, have attacked the aboriginal problem actively and constructively. All are agreed that, for the aborigines to survive and prosper, this numerically small group (about one per cent. of the total population) should be assimilated.

*Many fringe dwellers live in shack communities, such as this, on the outskirts of towns. In most States, as housing programmes continue, shacks are demolished. In New South Wales for example some £600,000 has been spent since the last war on improved housing.*







*Above—The social problem of the fringe dwellers is most complex. For these people to become normal members of the community requires more than Government effort and expenditure—help from the community and effort by the people themselves are both necessary.*

*Right—Aborigines and part-aborigines have shown a considerable aptitude for music; some have distinguished themselves in this field and in painting.*

## The nature of the problem

THE problem of the aborigines generally, and in its most urgent form, of the fringe dwellers, is a social and not a racial one. It is not a problem of how two different races of people can live harmoniously in one area while maintaining a racial separateness, but of how two groups of people can live together, serving and served by the same institutions, with the same rights, privileges, responsibilities, and obligations, undistinguished from each other in any significant social or economic particular.

Although the various government and mission authorities are agreed that assimilation is the only satisfactory and desirable policy, it remains a social fact that, apart from a few individuals and a few families who have become assimilated, most aborigines live apart from the rest of the community. They tend to group together and live a life that is neither aboriginal nor white in its characteristics. Some aspects of their aboriginal heritage—language, ideas of tribal obligation, for example—they tend to retain: others, such as the high moral and ethical standards of the tribe, administered in the past by tribal elders, they have lost or discarded. Living in miserable shelters on the outskirts of towns, without adequate facilities for hygiene, some of them have become what anthropologists have called “intelligent







*To people living on the fringe of the white community the gulf between may seem very great. This separation can be reduced when families move from shacks like this to homes in residential areas, but acceptance by the community is as necessary as improved housing.*

parasites". Their old way of life is gone—and most of their dignity with it; they would enter the new life if they could but they are ill-equipped, often apathetic, and need constant help and a welcome which is often denied to them by their white fellow Australians; denied not because they are racially different, but because their social standards and habits of hygiene and health awareness are deficient.

This situation is not one that can be legislated for, by segregation and the creation of reserves. Even if it were administratively possible to leave these people alone (which it is not) they refuse to be so left. All the Australian Governments, and the other organisations most actively in touch with the problem, agree that "assimilation" is the only answer.

The problem, however, is complicated by the differences in legislation in the various states and the Northern Territory and, within this legislation, differences on such matters as the definition of an "aboriginal". There are varying rights or restrictions of rights of franchise, and differing requirements in respect of such matters as social service benefits. The approach to the aboriginal problem is nevertheless in a continual state of movement and, although important, such differences as do exist are not critical or fundamental to the problem.



## What is assimilation ?

ASSIMILATION, the ultimate object in all native welfare measures in Australia, means, in practical terms, that, in the course of time, it is expected that all persons of aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live as white Australians do.

Assimilation is necessarily a slow process—indeed, danger may lie in too much haste—and it may take several generations. Nevertheless there is proof in the achievements of some aboriginal families that assimilation is possible. Aborigines can be assimilated. Present developments throughout Australia give hope for an increasing movement of fringe dwellers into the main body of the Australian community.

## The aboriginal heritage

MANY aspects of the tribal life of aborigines tend to persist and become barriers to the advancement and eventual assimilation of individuals and of groups.

Professor A. P. Elkin wrote recently: “Most good-hearted enthusiasts are apt to under-estimate the very great problems with which we confront aborigines in our desire to give them citizenship. We expect them to adapt themselves to a world that is fundamentally different from their own. Our way of life is based on individualism, on private ownership of property, on money, and on the necessity to be exact and specific in our calculations and dealings; moreover, the behaviour of the family and kin, even though important to the individual, is insignificant when compared with the behaviour required by the state and backed by its laws.”

Other native peoples, facing similar problems to the aborigines,

*European-type dwellings are replacing shacks in many places throughout Australia. Welfare officers concentrate on improving living conditions, securing employment for aborigines, maintaining a liaison between employer and employee, and improving the social relationship between aborigines and the white community.*





*Many part-aborigines are in regular employment earning high wages. They maintain relatively high standards of living. Despite this, however, some who are in every way ready to become part of the community remain on its fringe for want of encouragement and friendly help.*

have, in some instances, demonstrated remarkable adaptability, and a vigour and enthusiasm for the new way of life confronting them. These traits have not been generally apparent amongst the aborigines. If nothing else, this means that the white community in Australia has to be prepared, for a time at least, to modify some of its standards to help aborigines establish themselves in the community.

*Tribal Obligations*—In their tribal state aborigines survived, often in very harsh country, by a form of division of labour and a ritual sharing of food. Each member of the tribe had obligations to the tribe as a whole and to members of it standing in a particular relationship to him. This social custom, admirably suited to life in a tribal state, has survived and still continues to flourish in social contexts to which it is quite unsuited.

For example, an aboriginal may, by his own efforts, or because of a particular skill, earn rather more than his fellows. This may be sufficient to enable him to advance his status and that of his immediate



family, and establish himself in the community at large. He may, indeed, wish to do this but has a conflict of loyalties and of double standards—those of the community to which he belongs and those of the community to which he aspires. Faced with these alternatives, natives have, in the past, usually thrown in their lot with the way of life they know better rather than face the uncertainties and probable set-backs and frustrations of the new way of life.

Among the aborigines, tribal compulsions are often very strong, even among those who have not, in fact, ever experienced true tribal

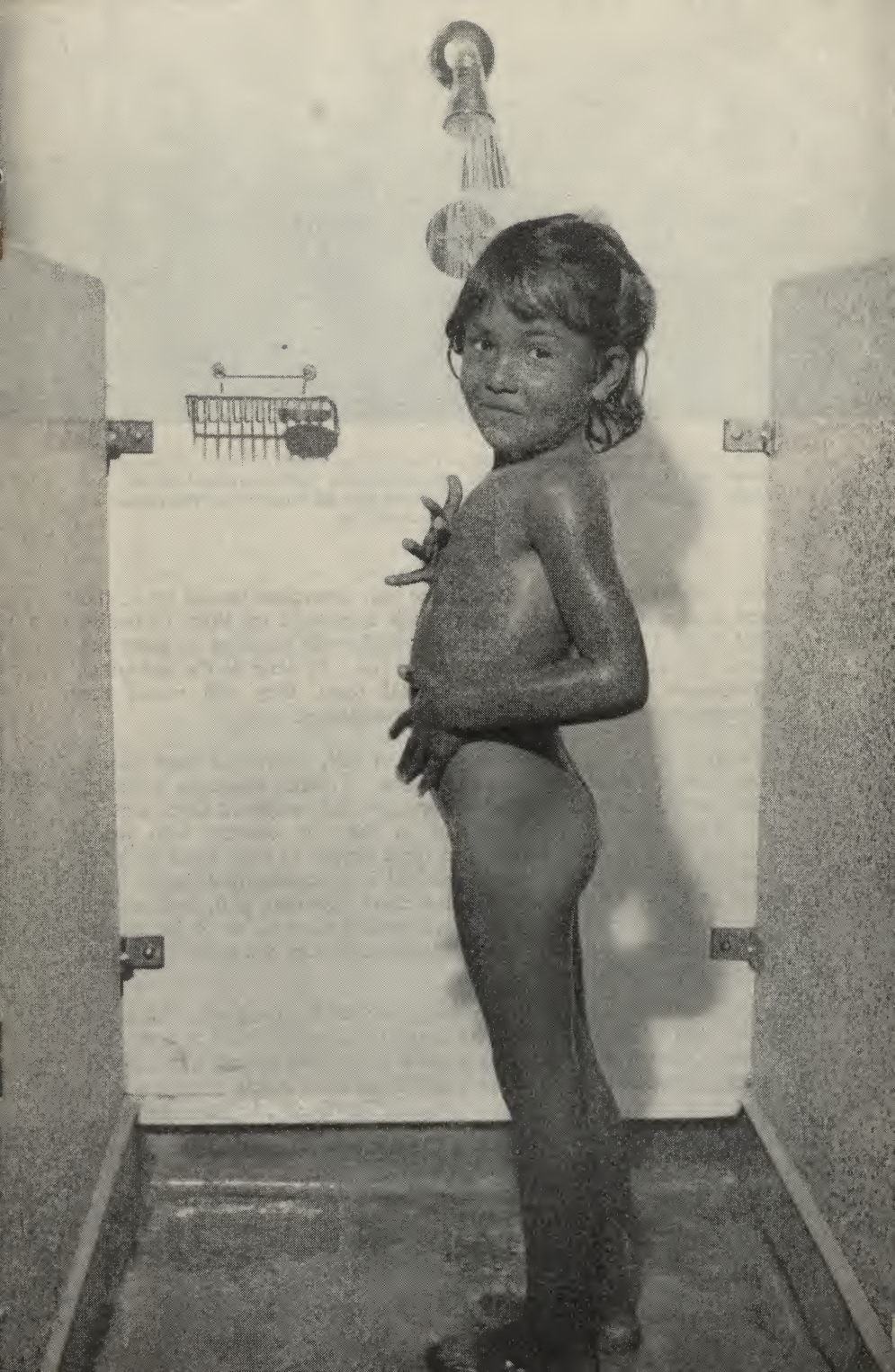
*With advanced aborigines and part-aborigines, hygiene is no longer a problem and a handicap to their assimilation. This has been largely the result of special measures that have been taken throughout Australia to help them overcome social handicaps.*















*This modern house is at Nambucca Heads, New South Wales. Here, as in other States, housing projects for aboriginal and part-aboriginal people are being vigorously developed, and the people are encouraged to participate in community activities.*

life. Whilst it is of course, desirable that aborigines should retain the best aspects of their own culture, it is important for them to realise that tribal obligations have to be considerably modified to meet the basic requirements of the new way of life. So long as the old tribal obligations are felt in their original form, they will retard the advancement of aborigines towards assimilation.

*Housing and Hygiene*—As a general rule, aborigines have shown a positive reluctance to live in houses. Tribally houseless nomads, their attitude towards houses is fundamentally different from that of the white community. Normally in the first contact with white settlement, they build simple structures similar to their bush shelters, but incorporating sheets of galvanised iron, canvas and bags. This type of "home" tends to become more elaborate and, because the same low standards of hygiene are applied to these as to the simple bush shelters, they soon become unhygienic and are often a menace to health.

Aborigines, who have had houses provided for them often have not used them properly. It is not unusual for a native living in a modern house to sleep in the open by a small fire. (The fire may, indeed, be made from a door or other part torn from the house!)

Until it is furnished, a house has only limited value. Furniture usually can only be obtained through efforts in the white economic system and, since many aborigines are as yet incapable of such effort, the provision of housing merely creates further problems.

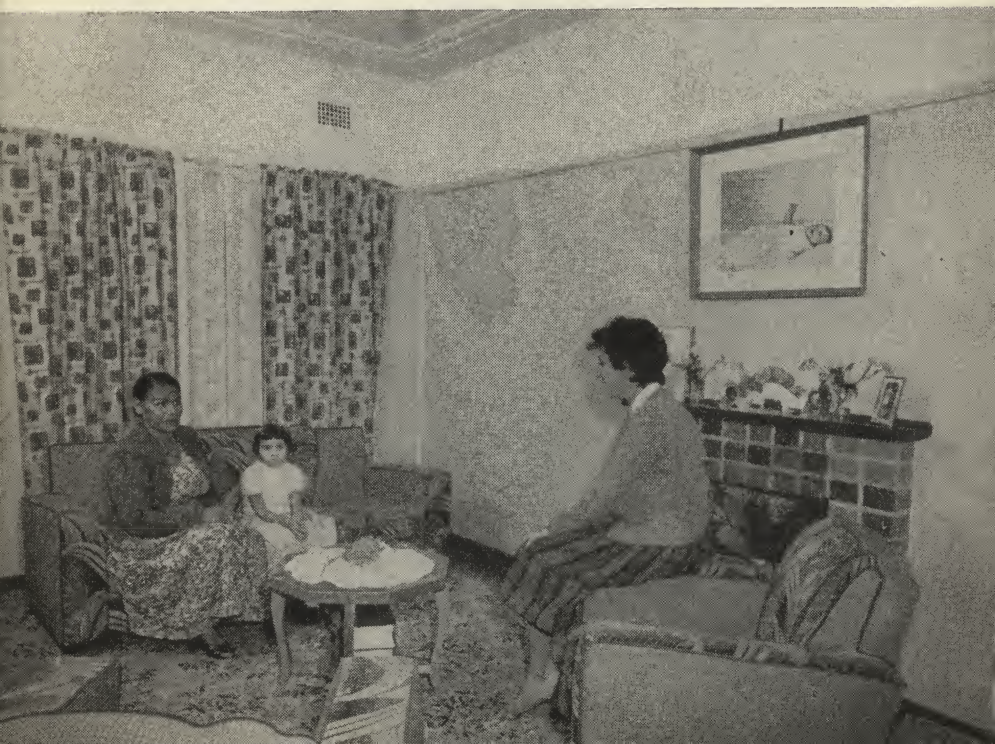


As with other social problems that of housing for aborigines cannot be rushed. Aborigines in whom tribal compulsions are still strong may completely abandon a house in which a death has occurred, because of traditional superstitious fears of malevolent powers.

In the case of the "fringe dwellers" the initial reluctance to live in houses has usually been overcome and the problem becomes a different one. Vigorous measures for properly housing these people are necessary so that those who are ready for assimilation may be helped towards this end by this means and further away from their own apathy and indifference and towards a position where they can no longer be disregarded by their white Australian neighbours. The ultimate object must be to have these people housed in the normal residential areas, as segregated housing does not solve the problem.

*"Walkabout"*—Despite the fact that neither a ritual nor a practical need for walkabouts still exists amongst people who are detribalised, the tendency to move around the countryside often persists. When the urge to do so is felt, aborigines will give up jobs, dissipate their earnings in fares, and abandon many of their material possessions.

*Some aboriginal people who, from a social point of view, may still be fringe dwellers, maintain standards of living far superior to that of some people in the white community. Such people are proof that assimilation is possible.*









It is obvious that fringe dwellers need to be encouraged to establish themselves permanently in the one place, to adopt a moderate and reasonable viewpoint on their obligations to visit relatives, and to see these obligations in the proper perspective relative to other obligations such as that of giving their children reasonable continuity in education.

This "walkabout" urge can be eliminated only by giving these people permanent and secure places in our community.

*Money and Employment*—The concepts of money and working for money were alien to tribal aborigines. In the tribe, food could not be hoarded and personal belongings were a positive hindrance in tribal wanderings. Each fit person worked, as a hunter, food-gatherer, or specialist in magic, for the benefit of the whole tribe. Individual

*Left*—In places like the Northern Territory the problem of fringe dwellers is not as acute as elsewhere. Many aborigines perform valuable work and their standard of living is relatively high.

*Below*—Physical fitness and the team spirit in games and sports are encouraged at special schools for aboriginal children. In general, special schools for aboriginal children operate only in remote areas or in places where special assistance and training are necessary.





*Aborigines at Government settlements in the Northern Territory are taught employment skills and their children are educated. For these people the problem of assimilation may thus be greatly simplified.*

effort for individual gain was unknown. The ideas of employment and existence in a money economy have, to the present, influenced aboriginal thinking and behaviour very little indeed.

### **The types of fringe dwellers**

Most aborigines, except the few thousand who are still truly nomadic, are fringe dwellers in some measure, and the range of these varies from State to State. Over the whole of Australia, however, the full range may be broken up, approximately, into groups with certain characteristics.

- (a) There are near-primitive people who are still semi-nomadic. They camp from time to time near towns, railway sidings, or aboriginal settlements controlled by government or mission authorities. They make temporary shelters that are usually a mixture of bush materials and tin and canvas, and rapidly become unhygienic. Usually these people are poorly clothed and discard many of their clothes when they leave settled areas. Their personal possessions are few in number, usually only a few blankets and some primitive cooking utensils. Usually they do not seek work and are a problem because of liquor (supplied by more "advanced" aborigines



or by unscrupulous whites) and the prostitution of their women. In most places efforts are made to induce these natives to remain in the one area, to undertake work locally if this is available, to improve the standards of their dwellings, and to allow their children to go to school. These efforts are made for the benefit of all the people (even though most of the adults can never be assimilated) but more particularly for the children so that these can be educated and trained for their future life which will inevitably be closer to that of the white community than is that of their parents.

- (b) The next group of people are those a little more settled in their habits. They build more permanent dwellings, often undertake casual or seasonal work and, in many cases, their children go to school. Usually, however, their aboriginal heritage is very strong and they may leave work at any time to go on "walkabout". Such education as their children have is often interrupted for long periods or is terminated far too early in the case of young lads who are taken away

*In general the work performed by aborigines and part-aborigines is unskilled or semi-skilled. Economic security is necessary for the successful assimilation of these people.*





*Maternal and child welfare services are in many places available equally to aborigines and part-aborigines as to other members of the community.*

for tribal initiation. As with the previous group, excessive drinking of liquor and low standards tend to mitigate the effects of the efforts made for their advancement. In some places, such as in South Australia, the Government attempts to improve their conditions by erecting simple types of dwellings for them to encourage them to live in a European-type home. As a group these people can hardly be considered as ready for assimilation, but a first step is made towards this end with the building of houses and the education in some degree of their children.

- (c) There are groups of people, in whom the tribal heritage has faded but is still quite strong, who have lived semi-permanently in shacks for some time, have had continuity of employment for some time, and whose children attend school regularly. Many of them live satisfactorily in good standard homes, with bathrooms and laundries, which have been provided for them or which, in some cases, they have erected by their own efforts. In the case of many of these people fresh problems have arisen. A typical problem is the dearth of suitable employment in a particular area or, for sound or unsound reasons, the attitude of the white community towards them. Their own reluctance to assert themselves in the social and economic life of the community at large is also a problem that needs attention.



- (d) Large numbers of fringe dwellers come into the group of people, wholly or partly aboriginal, who are separated by a generation or more from fully tribal life, and who are, in many particular respects, drifting between the two cultures and belonging to neither. Usually in these people the adults have had some education and speak reasonable English. On the whole they live in groups of shanties on the outskirts of country towns and undertake various types of work. Many of them are well advanced in various respects but, because of their manner of living, are not generally socially acceptable in the white community. Drink is often a problem among these people. The possibility should not be overlooked that they may have recourse to alcohol as a result of the attitude of the community towards them. In this grouping there are individuals and families who are, in many ways, sufficiently advanced to become part of the community at large but who, because of less advanced

*Education is the rock on which successful assimilation can be built. Simple bush schools such as this one in Western Australia, perform a valuable service. The vastness and difficult physical conditions of Western Australia and the fragmentation of the aboriginal population make welfare activities particularly difficult.*



relatives, the hangover of tribal obligations, and the attitude of their own people towards them, are not prepared to make the break.

- (e) Finally, there are people, mostly part-aborigines, who live in urban and farming areas, have more-or-less regular employment, maintain reasonable standards of living, and perhaps the only bars to their assimilation are their own reluctance to break from other fringe dwellers and the indifference of the white community towards them.

### What is being done ?

ACTIVITIES for the welfare and advancement of aborigines and part-aborigines vary, according to the circumstances in this area or that, and it is possible only to indicate very sketchily the nature and extent of some of this work.

In each State the Christian Missions, staffed by devoted men and

*Technical training at schools is helping youths to enter skilled trades. Some aborigines have already shown themselves to be fine craftsmen.*







*Students at a New South Wales High School. Progressively greater numbers of aboriginal and part-aboriginal children are receiving secondary education in the different States. Some young aboriginal people have been appointed to State Public Services.*





*Many aboriginal and part-aboriginal children are assimilated in their school community. The greatest hope for assimilation lies with the school children.*

women, carry out valuable work in health, education, and training for employment, quite apart from their spiritual work. The spiritual work of the missions is, however, of special value because of what they are doing in their religious teaching to give meaning and value to the life of these people. The missions can satisfy a spiritual need and their creed and counsel replace, and fill the gap left by, the beliefs and superstitions that played such a significant part in the lives of tribal aborigines. The history of missionary effort is one both of successes and of setbacks and disappointments; such work always calls for great Christian fortitude, patience, and faith.

In addition to the Christian Missions there are now numbers of organisations and committees whose work has been of particular value and who have in some cases achieved notable successes in their efforts with groups and individuals. The work of these people and of individuals in the community will be of increasing value in assisting fringe dwellers to move into the normal community.

Activities by the various governments include the provision of improved housing, often within normal residential areas, special



educational facilities where these are necessary, training for employment, and, in places, vigorous efforts to educate the attitude and behaviour of the Australian community generally. The programme of assimilation is concentrated on the younger generation and particular emphasis is given to education, health, and training in hygiene.

*The programmes of assimilation throughout Australia concentrate particularly on children. For many of them, and in due course for their children, hopes for assimilation are high.*





*This is a committee for aboriginal advancement in N.S.W. Very valuable work is done by committees and societies, even in small towns. Aborigines often take an active part within these organisations.*

### **The question of attitude**

A few years ago there were occasional difficulties raised by local residents or even councils when it was proposed that aborigines should be housed in normal residential areas; people have "walked out" on jobs where aborigines were employed; there were protests about aboriginal children attending normal schools or using swimming baths. There have been setbacks and difficulties of this sort which have, in most cases, been overcome.

The attitude towards fringe dwellers, fortunately, has in large measure changed, and the trend now is largely towards helping the fringe dwellers to find their proper place in the modern world. This change in attitude has not been achieved without very great effort and devotedness by large numbers of people. What has been achieved in this regard is, however, but the beginning. A great deal remains yet to be done; the practical rewards in the change of attitude have yet to be won—and attitude still needs to be educated in some places.

Government and mission efforts alone are not enough. The fringe



dwellers are a social problem. They are a challenge to the community. Much more than the right attitude and expressions of sympathy are needed. Concrete, practical assistance for the material welfare of the fringe dwellers, personal and individual aid to these people to help them cross the threshold to assimilation, constant vigilance to prevent them sliding back to the old way of life, belief in their right to be part of the community, and enthusiasm in the protection and promotion of that right, are all essential to the solution of the problem. Only with them can the fringe dweller cease to be a fringe dweller and find social and personal fulfilment as a full member of the community.

---

V. C. N. BLIGHT, GOVERNMENT PRINTER

70278 6.59

---







